
Legendry and the Rhetoric of Truth

Author(s): Elliott Oring

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Legendry and the Rhetoric of Truth

The genre of legend has long been defined in relation to truth and belief, and legend scholars have noted some of the devices that serve to establish legend credibility. In fact, legend employs an extensive rhetoric in establishing its truth, and this essay aims to provide a comprehensive description of the tropes of this rhetoric in terms of Aristotle's categories of persuasion: ethos, logos, and pathos. Illustrations of these tropes are presented with a discussion of their characteristics. Scholarly attempts to define the legend genre might abandon truth and belief as criteria in favor of a performance of truth realized with this rhetoric.

I never set eyes on her in my life;
but he that told me the story said this was so true,
that I might vouch it for a real truth,
and even swear I had seen it all myself.

—Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

Legend is perhaps one of the most exciting genres of folklore research today. The stuff of legends—the supernatural, the horrific, the disastrous, the uncanny, the improbable, and the comical—is the stuff of our everyday attention and conversation.¹ Furthermore, there is wide interest in these sorts of expression. The general public evinces this interest in its consumption of books, television shows, and films on legends; and there is an interest on the part of public institutions—government, industry, the press—to gauge the extent and understand the willingness of people to believe a host of unlikely events.²

The downside of legend, from the point of view of the folklorist, is that no one seems to be able to pin down precisely what it is. Is it a narrative that proposes as true an account of events in the world that is objectively false (F. Ranke 1925:14)? Is it a narrative whose truth is the object of negotiation and debate (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:119)? Is it a narrative composed of traditional motifs (G. Bennett 1999:4; Ellis 1994:68; P. Smith 1989:98)? Is it to be distinguished from the anecdote or the personal experience story (Dégh 1991:15)? Is it restricted to a particular type of communicative channel or conduit (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:96)? Is it a process to test and define the boundaries of the real world and gain control over “ambiguous

ELLIOTT ORING is Professor of Anthropology, emeritus, California State University, Los Angeles

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situations" (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:32; Ellis 1987:34, 68)? Is it a narrative that, unlike the folktale, is without form (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:93)? Is a legend told as true in one situation still a legend when told merely for entertainment in another (Ellis 1994:70–1)? Is legend a narrative at all (G. Bennett 1988a; Dégh 1996:34; Georges 1971:11; Nicolaisen 1987)? An exchange on these issues has been going on for the past thirty years, and although much of the discussion has been quite engaging, it would be premature to say that there is anything like complete agreement. As one prominent legend scholar concluded, "At best, then, the term 'legend' is probably a term of convenience which should not be taken too literally; at worst, it may be a misleading simplification" (G. Bennett 1991:189).

Most legend scholars hold that legend has some relation to belief; more specifically, that legends involve a debate about a belief (Dégh 2001:97). While this may be so, the problem is that almost everything entails belief. My shopping list entails the belief that the items written on it are available at the supermarket. Should a debate as to whether the local market actually stocks the items on my list make this discussion a legend? Folktales also entail belief, the belief that the events they describe do not really happen: giant beanstalks do not grow from magic beans, and wolves do not swallow humans whole. Furthermore, the discussion of belief has relied too heavily on accounts of the supernatural (e.g., Dégh 2001:216). The recounting of a supernatural occurrence invites belief in a separate domain of agents and forces.³ A comic tale about a series of accidents, however, entails no generalized belief other than that a concatenation of unlikely events could occur (Shuman 2005:89–119). To merge both of these instances into the same category of "belief" would obscure a distinction that might be worth preserving.

I prefer the notion that legend is concerned with matters of truth.⁴ First and foremost, a legend makes a claim about the truth of an *event*. For me, a legend is, or approximates, a narrative. Much of the commentary and debate about the event that the narrative recounts is likely to be non-narrative in nature. Belief, rumor, and ritual (Dégh 2001:83–6, 403–4) may be related to legend but can be distinguished from it. For the whole, I would employ the term "legendry," an imprecise term to suggest a range of expressions that gravitate around such narratives. Legends may lead to the discussion of belief beyond a belief in the narrative incidents themselves. They may invoke discussion about the constitution of the world and the principles by which it operates. On many occasions, however, they do not.

It has long been noted that legendry possesses what has been called its own "belief language." This is the language of tradition—a common fund of knowledge that forms the "belief vocabulary" with which communications are constructed and which are cemented together with "the appropriate linguistic bonding agents" (Hóppal quoted in Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974:279). Without recourse to this belief language of agents, objects, forces, and signs, a proposition or narrative may be misinterpreted or totally misunderstood. Even when communities share belief, as in a belief in the devil, their belief languages may create very different understandings of what constitute the signs of his presence. A European, for example, would likely recognize a person with a horse's hoof as the devil. A North American might miss this identification, however (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974:279–80). Belief languages often have specific histories

situated in the life of particular communities. They are only sometimes shared. But what frequently seems to be shared in the enactment of legendry are the means of making claims for the truth, plausibility, and untruth of an account.⁵ Not a few students of legendry have commented on strategies for making narratives appear true (e.g., Ballard 1980; G. Bennett 1984, 1999; Blehr 1967:259–60; Boyes 1984; Correll 2005; Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:11–2; Ellis 1987; G. Smith 1979; M. Wilson 1997). But these strategies—these “authenticating devices” (G. Bennett 1988a:2)—have generally been identified piecemeal in the process of discussing particular legends, legend clusters, and performance situations. These devices, however, would seem to coalesce in what might legitimately be described as a rhetoric—a *rhetoric of truth*. My concern here is to outline and illustrate this rhetoric. I am not interested in the rhetoric of the genre per se (Abrahams 1968). I am only interested in how legends are made to seem true (or untrue).

Legendry seems particularly apt for a study of the rhetoric of truth. Statements that are accepted as obviously true generate little commentary. “We comment on something we regard as false, something whose truth is open to debate, and on the occurrence of a ‘true’ statement when we had some reason to expect a false one” (Hobbs 1987:139). H. Paul Grice’s cooperative principle for bona fide communication is based on four maxims, one of which is the Maxim of Quality: say only what you believe to be true (1975:45–7). Truth, in other words, is to be assumed unless something serves to signal otherwise. Legends, however, make what are perceived to be extraordinary claims. Because legendary narratives tend, regardless of their subject matter, to make such claims, they require the deployment of a rhetoric to allay doubts and foil challenges.

There are two claims that a legend can make regarding its truth. The first is for the truth of the account as it is given. If the narrative is about a surprise party in which a person embarrasses himself before a group of hidden guests, as in “The Surpriser Surprised” (Jansen 1979), then a claim is made that the party took place and the embarrassing behavior occurred in front of the guests as described. If the narrative is about a babysitter high on drugs who puts the baby she is caring for in the oven thinking that it is a turkey (Brunvand 1981:65–9), then the claim is that the account accurately reports what she did. But there is a second claim that some—but not all—legends make. Some legends make claims that go beyond the facts. The facts themselves call for further interpretation. A narrator told of a wealthy man who had a telephone installed in the mausoleum where he planned to be entombed, because he felt that he would come back to life. He promised to call his wife when he did. Several years later they found that his wife died of a sudden heart attack after she picked up the phone. When they checked the mausoleum, they found the receiver off the hook (Baker 1982:204). This legend presents a set of facts but asks the listeners to make the following inferences as well: that the man came back to life and called his wife; she was so shocked to hear his voice that she died. A persuasive claim for this interpretation might require the narrator to present evidence to discount alternative hypotheses: that the phone in the mausoleum had not been accidentally or deliberately taken off the hook; that the wife had a heart attack when she was on the phone with someone other than her husband. In other words, even if the facts of the case are accepted as true, the possibilities of coincidence or deception need to be elimi-

nated. An interpretation of the events is called for: supernatural, happenstance, or ruse.⁶

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. But if the legend's rhetoric of truth is learned, it is not explicitly taught. There are no manuals for its instruction or schools dedicated to its practice. It is a "folk" or "vernacular" rhetoric (Howard 2005) acquired by native speakers conjointly with the grammatical rules of their language, their sociolinguistic sensibilities, and their socialization for storytelling.⁷ Here, I present this rhetoric, with some modifications, in terms of Aristotle's categories of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. *Ethos* is concerned with the character of the speaker, or in the case of legends, the speaker and the purported legend source. In *ethos*, I refer to matters concerning the narrator that bear upon the credibility of the account. *Logos* is concerned with the argument of the narratives and their attendant commentaries. *Pathos* focuses on the dispositions of the audience. Aristotle stresses the emotional aspects of audience response, but I would include cognitive and moral aspects as well (Aristotle 1991:38–9).⁸

Although the number of techniques or tropes in legendry's rhetoric of truth is undoubtedly finite, it should not be presumed that the catalogue below is complete. Nor do I make claims for it beyond Western European and American legend repertoires in modern times. Nevertheless, comprehensiveness is a worthwhile goal. The hope here is to name, characterize, and illustrate as many tropes as possible based largely, although not exclusively, on a perusal of transcribed oral texts. Examples are drawn from a number of narratives to show that the tropes in question are not peculiar to a particular social group or performance situation. Some of the tropes outlined below have been previously identified by legend scholars. Others, however, have not.

Outline of Tropes

ETHOS

- The Authority of the Source
- Risk to the Narrator
- Distancing
- Judgment
 - Reflexivity
 - Alternative Explanations
- Reluctance
- Ignorance
- Testing

LOGOS

- Intonation, Countenance, and Demeanor
- Laughter and Humor
- Framing
- Narrative Positioning
- Assertions and Affirmations
- Witnesses and Experts
- Corroborative Invitations and Challenges
- Discounting Alternative Explanations

- Narrative
- Narrative Strategy
- Narrative Detail
- Story Logic
- Paralogism
 - Behavioral Consequence
 - Emotional Reaction
 - Evaluation
 - Physical Evidence
- Instance of a Class
- Theory
- Secondary Legends
- Aesthetic Effects
 - Dramatization
 - Humor
 - Foreshadowing
 - Concealed Plot Functions
 - Synecdoche

PATHOS

- Cognitive Expectations
- Emotional Expectations
- Moral Expectations

Ethos

The Authority of the Source

The authority of a source depends, to some extent, upon the social position of the narrator and/or the reputed source of the narrative. A narrator may be the source of the narrative (as in a memorate), or a narrator may attribute the narrative to some other source, a relative, a friend, or the friend of a friend. The status of the narrator and/or source in a rhetoric of truth can be entechnic or atechnic. That is to say, how the narrator and source are presented can be embodied in the discourse itself (entechnic), or it may stand outside the discourse (atechnic) (Aristotle 1991:37). The authority of the narrator and sources may be a matter of established knowledge. For example, in a legend I collected that I call "Messages from the Dead," the narrator was a physician. I knew this individual to be a licensed and competent physician, and his status lent authority to the narrative he related. However, the narrative itself—which concerns one of his patients whose daughter has died and who sends a message to her mother from the other world—also establishes his status as a practicing and concerned physician. Consequently, his status as a physician and any authority that might attend that status are presented in speech for anyone who might happen to hear it, even if they had not independently recognized him to be a doctor.

The status that bears upon the truth of an account is not simply a matter of professional or high-prestige positions. Doctors, flight attendants, paramedics, soccer play-

ers, or garbage collectors may bring authority to their narrations depending on the speech situation and the nature of the matter conveyed. Often, one of the most important status distinctions that bears on such authority is that of insider versus outsider with respect to some particular social group.

Not infrequently, the source for a narrative is a written account, the printed word, or some other communicative medium. The status of these sources may be previously known or established through speech: "Once in this magazine, like, I read . . ." (G. Bennett 1989a:308), "I think it were in the *Weekend* magazine" (G. Bennett 1989a:309), or "When I read about it, I've believed it" (G. Bennett 1999:37). Newspapers, radio, and television often have a degree of credibility, because they are public and produced by organizations that are supposed to check information and have the resources for doing so.⁹ A Mexican girl disobeys her mother and goes to a nightclub and dances with a handsome young man who, in actuality, is the devil. In some versions, the woman is found dead. In another, she is impregnated by the devil's tail. One narrator claimed, "It came out in the newspapers and everything; it even came out on the radio" (Sobek 1988:152). However, another narrator, discussing a similar story, stated, "This was documented in a very famous Mexican newspaper called *Alarma*." This statement is ironic since *Alarma* is a "rag," so the attribution is actually meant to undercut the credibility of the account (149–50).

The authority of the source may rest less on social status than on attributes of character. The character of the source, and the physiological and psychological state of the source, often becomes critical in producing a credible account. Thus, the physician who related "Messages from the Dead" identified the mother of the dead child as the source of his account. In characterizing the mother, the physician said that he had seen the patient many times before and that "she's an educated woman, she's very verbal, and she's always been there for legitimate complaints and nothing hypochondriacal" (Interview with Steven Barr, November 13, 1975).

Such attestations of character and sobriety are frequent: "I tell you that an aunt of mine seen a fairy. Now she believes that, and I believe her because I know her and she wouldn't tell a lie" (Ballard 1980:38); "The poor man, they do say they are mostly in his head now, but sure he was a fine fresh man twenty years ago, the night he saw them [the fairies]" (Correll 2005:14); "It wasn't drink; look at John Arch that never tasted a drop in his life" (6).

The character of a source may be discussed explicitly, as in the examples above, or alluded to indirectly. In a Mormon variant of the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legend, the hitchhiker disappears from the backseat of a vehicle after proclaiming that the end of the world was approaching and that the occupants of the car should immediately start storing food as the church had advised. In these stories, the drivers of the vehicle are often Mormons on their way to do temple work or leaders on their way to a church meeting. Although these persons are not explicitly identified as the source of the story, people engaged in such activities are regarded by Mormons to be the most worthy and upright. Given the implication that the story could only have originated with the account of such worthies, an attestation of character is present, if only implicitly (W. Wilson 1975:87).

Risk to the Narrator

Some rhetorical force would seem to inhere in the risk that a narrator takes in telling his or her story. The more risk a narrator takes in telling a tale, the more likely the story would be perceived as true. In “Messages from the Dead,” for example, a physician tells of a patient’s deceased daughter who seems to write symbols on a chalkboard in her mother’s garage. The physician had shown no previous interest in or disposition toward supernatural encounters or interpretations. Yet his recounting of the event suggests that he entertains their possibility. But the physician also tells of his attempt to dissuade his distraught patient from visiting a psychic in order to deal with her experience. The physician places himself in a difficult situation: he seems to entertain the patient’s account, yet he admits he could not support her in seeking help from an expert in such matters. He also indicates that he repeated the account to a number of his colleagues—doctors and nurses—potentially exposing himself to challenge and perhaps ridicule. A narrator who tells a story that casts himself in a negative light or risks his reputation—professional or otherwise—makes an argument for the plausibility of his account.

In his famous book, *Liber Facietiarum* (ca. 1450 C.E.; Hurwood 1968), Giovanni Francesco Poggio Bracciolini includes a great number of the jokes and anecdotes—mostly dirty—of his day. But it also includes an infusion of legendary materials. In a series of stories about monstrous animals, Poggio tells of a cow that gave birth to an enormous serpent that proceeded to suck out all of the cow’s milk before departing. The cow later gave birth to a normal calf. Poggio states that “this was communicated [to the Pope] in a letter from Ferrara” (Hurwood 1968:47; see also Ellis 2001b:81). Taking the risk of reporting the account to a superior speaks to the faith of the reporter in the event and enhances the credibility of the account.

Distancing

“Distancing” refers to the degrees of separation between a narrator and the presumed source of the narrative. Georgina Smith (1981:169) classifies narrative in terms of such distances. They are either (1) “incorporated” (that is, memorates), (2) “semi-incorporated” (accounts of events attached “to a relative, named friend, or local character”), or (3) “detached” (narratives told without attribution of sources and the person or persons to whom the events purportedly happened).¹⁰ Because distancing relates to the position of the narrator with respect to the events recounted, distancing is included in the category of ethos. Distancing directly relates to the authority of the narrator.

The more unambiguous the source of a narrative, the more believable the narrative is likely to be. Likewise, the closer the connection of a narrator to his or her source, the more credible the account is likely to be. Thus, it is often in the interest of the narrator in establishing the credibility of a narrative to identify a source and to specify his or her relationship to that source.

The first-person memorate is likely to be the most suasive type of account, for the narrator claims to report something he or she has experienced. The narrator takes

full responsibility for the account.¹¹ There is no basis for suggesting that story elements have been misapprehended or corrupted in a chain of transmission. To question such a narrative would be to challenge the narrator's judgment, truthfulness, and perhaps even sanity (Slotkin 1988:107).

More distanced accounts are generally less credible (Bennett 1988b:16; G. Smith 1981:168). Distances, however, are relative. Accounts from family members and close friends are more distant than a first-person narrative, but they are not so distant as an account from a person with whom the narrator has no social connection: a friend of a friend, or some otherwise unnamed or unspecified source.

The following attributions in legends display differing—and I would argue, increasing—distances between the narrator and the source of the events reported: “My mother was a Blackfoot Indian. I was ten years old when I had my first experience” (Pisarski 1980:131); “Well, and it’s one that happened in my life when my father died. We went to the funeral and . . .” (G. Bennett 1984:86); “Oh, my father-in-law saw that. . . . Ooh yes! No doubt about that! When he was quite young! In Manchester!” (G. Bennett 1988a:2); “Last week, this twenty-four-year-old woman came in to see me specifically because she was having trouble sleeping. . . . Now talking with her, she started to describe . . .” (Interview with Steven Barr, November 13, 1975); “And Diane Dugan knew these two boys personally” (Ellis 2001a:123); “The girl’s family lives in the town where my brother teaches, in North Jersey” (Jansen 1979:65); “This story was told to me by my roommate last summer [1970]. He heard it from a person he had known when he lived in the dorm during the previous semester at . . . [the university]. The incident happened to some friends of this person in northern Kentucky, where he was from” (Jansen 1979:85); “Devil’s Hollow, as I heard and recall it . . .” (Gutowski 1980:79); “Well the way I heard it . . .” (Lecocq 1980:273); “It is reported . . .” (W. Wilson 1975:84); “This was a small college at Christmas and Thanksgiving vacation” (Grider 1980:154).

Distancing is, to some extent, a matter of choice. Undoubtedly, many narrators would be reluctant to personalize an occurrence that they had only heard about third hand. If all narratives were personalized in order to enhance their credibility, there would be no third-person narratives. Nevertheless, Edgar Slotkin (1988) has shown a narrator switching from a third-person to a first-person presentation of the legend “Swinging Chains.” The legend describes a short engineer named Bert who always reached up and hit a series of eight chains hanging before the power plant boilers to set them swinging as he passed. After Bert died on the factory premises, the chains would suddenly start swinging of their own accord, as though he were passing under them and hitting them as he did when alive. The narrator’s reason for the change in distance was not necessarily to enhance the truth of the account but to play to a particular audience member (103–5). Nevertheless, the switch from a distanced account to a first-person account would have considerable rhetorical force for someone who had never heard it told as a third-person account.¹²

Similarly, a letter writer to a British newspaper claimed that her sister worked in the social security office and “signed the bill for a colour television set for someone on supplementary benefit.” A newspaperman checked with the letter writer, who

admitted that it was not really her sister but one of her friends who signed the bill. "I just put that in my letter because it looked better" (G. Smith 1981:170).¹³

It is not surprising that legend distance often settles on the familiar "friend of a friend" (sometimes acronymized by folklorists as "FOAF"; Brunvand 1984:51; Dale 1978:13). It is a convenient rhetorical average. On the one hand, one source of the narrative is someone known to the narrator, someone whose character and judgment are presumably trustworthy. The friend's friend (or cousin's friend, or friend's cousin, or neighbor's aunt), however, is a stranger to the narrator. The narrator cannot vouch for the person at two removes, although presumably the narrator's friend might. The friend-of-a-friend attribution therefore establishes a close connection to a source with one known and supposedly trustworthy link and one unknown and potentially untrustworthy one. The formulation is a brilliant compromise in that the narrator can establish a relation to a potentially credible source without being held accountable for it.

Sometimes a narrator will establish a connection to one of the characters in the narrative who may or may not be the source of the story itself. That the character is the source may only be implied. In an account of "The Wife Left at the Roadside" (or "The Nude in the RV"; Brunvand 1981:132–6), the narrator frames the narrative with "It was my aunty's neighbor who we knew very well. . . . Hayes was their name" (G. Bennett 1988b:14). In some cases, it is clear that the character could not be the source of the story. "I talked with him many, many times," said the narrator of the "Swinging Chains" protagonist. But the narrator left the plant where they both were working and returned only after the man was dead, when the legend about him had already begun (Slotkin 1988:93). Nevertheless, the connection to the individual increases the account's credibility.

There are circumstances in which the failure to specify a source might actually add to a narrative's credibility. This occurs when a source is purportedly known, but the names and relations are suppressed to protect the persons involved. "This really happened in. . . . The names are withheld because they are very well-known people in the community" (Glazer 1988:140). "Did you read about the poltergeists? You should talk to the lady who moved to seven homes, was haunted for fourteen years. . . . Course I can't give her address, I don't think she would be in the mood to talk to you" (Dégh 1995:87). Or, "He claimed he was 'too well known' in the community to be attached to something as misunderstood as ghostdom" (Ellis 2001a:93). The rhetorical move is clear, for there would be no point in attempting to protect the identity of people in a story if the story itself were not true.

Judgment

Of all the character traits that a narrator must display in his narration, discernment and judgment are the most central to establishing the truth of the account. Narrators endeavor to establish themselves as sober, perceptive, and critical individuals—not given to fantasy or gullibility. They attempt to register that the events they recount, though often extraordinary, are nevertheless real. Legends are often filled with effects to register the good judgment of the narrator. There are several basic ones: reflexiv-

ity, the consideration of alternative explanations, reluctance, the admission of ignorance, and testing.

Reflexivity. Often, narrators narrate reflexively so that, in the course of their relation, they evaluate the account from the perspective of their listeners. Who has not begun an account of an unusual or incredible experience with, "You are going to think I'm crazy, but . . ."? Narrators introduce their account by highlighting its incredibility, only to trump it with the evidence of their own experience. So begins an encounter with a spirit that haunts an old family homestead: "I am not an atheist, but rather a non-believer. I believe only what I can see. If I had not experienced the following story myself, I would have laughed at it" (Valk 2006:41). Or, "I might not believe myself there are such things but for what happened to me not long after I was married" (Correll 2005:6). Or, "Shall I tell you why I have this belief as well, which sounds really—I mean anyone would think, did she see it or didn't she. . . ." (G. Bennett 1984:86). Or, "I am the type of person who doesn't believe in anything I can't see and only half of what I hear" (Dégh 2001:350). Narrators also anticipate questions that their listeners might ask in order to demonstrate that they have critically examined the problems raised by their accounts (Correll 2005:3–4).

Alternative Explanations. Frequently, narrators will proffer an alternative explanation for what they have seen, usually, however, to eliminate the likelihood of that alternative explanation. A woman claims that she saw three puffs of smoke in her father's bedroom after his funeral. Her father had been a smoker. She admits to being a smoker but says, "I wasn't smoking then." She continues, "Somebody else could have looked in the bedroom and had a cigarette before I went in, but I honestly did [see] about three [smoke] rings like that. Now the only thing that I've sort of satisfied myself was, 'Oh, yes! Somebody else has been upstairs, and they've gone in there you see for something or had a cigarette.' But they were there!" (G. Bennett 1984:86).

The offering of alternative explanations of events has been portrayed as a defensive strategy on the part of narrators. Narrators wish to protect themselves from charges of superstition and credulity (Correll 2005:8). This may often be the case. But the proffering of rationalistic explanations for seemingly supernormal events also serves to display the discernment that suggests that the narrator possesses a sound mind and good judgment—someone worthy of trust and belief.

Reluctance. In an account of a legend called "The Fast Food Ghost," the narrator goes to great lengths to suggest alternative explanations for his experiences, even as these explanations seem to evaporate one by one. The narrator claims to have seen a figure one night. He knew he had locked the store, but he thought he saw someone standing by the freezer area wearing a flat-brimmed hat and buckskin jacket. The image moved out of view down the hall. The narrator assumes a critical approach to his vision. He checks all the doors to see that they are locked and the restrooms to see that no one is there. A sighting of the phantom took place at a later date, when the same narrator was walking past the pizzeria. He reported that he waved his arms to ascertain whether the image he saw might be his own reflection. The figure moved towards him, and he wondered whether it could be the headlights of a car. Then the image vanished (Ellis 2001a:127–8, 136).

The narrator claimed that he looked into local history to see whether any incident

had occurred in the vicinity of the pizzeria. He didn't find that anyone had been killed there, but he was open to the possibility. He then stated, "I don't believe there's such a thing as a ghost, but I damn well want to find out what there was. . . . That's why I have to find out if there is something there. Am I just seeing things or is there something there. I think there is something there because of everybody having these spooky things happening" (131–2).

The narrator resists identifying the figure he saw as a ghost—even at his interviewer's urging—although he seems more open to the possibilities of a "spirit," some "physical force," or "magnetic energy" (132–3). Nevertheless, he has done some research to find out whether anyone has been killed in the vicinity, he has established that the figure is not likely to be material, and he is afraid of the manifestation. He has offered no real suggestion to explain what concept might account for what he saw other than his own misperception, which he suggests but does not seem to believe.

Bill Ellis feels that the narrator's sense of dissonance is the result of being forced to cast his encounters in an experientially ungrammatical way. Ghosts do not appear in pizzerias, shopping malls, or other venues of modernity. Because the narrator could not fit his experience into the traditional cast of ghostly sightings, he rejected the ghostly interpretation for fear of being thought deviant. He was caught between his experience and the language to express that experience (Ellis 2001a:138–41).

Ellis may be right, but the narrator's formulations also persuade that he is a trustworthy observer, one who questions and tests his perceptions, a rationalist unwilling to grasp at supernatural explanations even when no others offer themselves.¹⁴ He presents himself as a reluctant witness or at least as a reluctant interpreter of what he has witnessed, and within his persistent self-questioning and his reluctance is much of his rhetoric of truth.

Ignorance. Sometimes narrators confess to an ignorance of the facts themselves. In doing so, they present themselves as prudent chroniclers, resisting claims to complete knowledge. However, the overall account and its interpretation generally remain unaffected. Thus, in recounting the difficult relations between Bell Gunness—a woman who later proved to be a serial murderess and the topic of many narratives in La Porte, Indiana—and her neighbor, the narrator corrects herself about whose cows may have trespassed first: "It may have been that his [cows] went in there first and then he had to pay to get them back" (Langlois 1978:153). The narrator's obvious care in recounting the facts suggests that facts are not matters to be trifled with. The narrator is making an explicit effort to get things right, which enhances the credibility of the whole.

Testing. A narrator may indicate what tests were performed to authenticate evidence or to favor a particular interpretation. The narrator of "The Fast-Food Ghost" mentions how he checks his perception by waving his arms to eliminate the possibility that it was his own reflection that he was seeing. Teenagers describing a visit to a haunted cemetery site guarded by Indian ghosts often mention their unexplainable car trouble. The car would stall repeatedly "although there was nothing wrong with the engine 'cause we checked" (Meley 1991:8). Another teenager recounted how his brother and his friends called up on a ouija board the spirit of a Mrs. Brown, who told them how she died: "And [they] went to check up the house, and they asked them

this and it were all true. And they went to her grave as well" (G. Bennett 1989a:306), in an effort to confirm the information that they had received.

In an isolated location in northern Indiana, a man was supposed to have killed himself after he killed his wife. He didn't leave a suicide note, but before he died, he built a strange fence around his house in which no section replicates the design of any other section. It was believed that the man had encrypted a suicide message in his fence. A light was always supposed to be on in his house on the hill. "Several of us did one time more or less concentrate on the fence and did conclude that part was true. . . . The light itself always burns. . . . I been down there every time of the day or night . . . and the same light was always burning" (Gutowski 1980:75–6).

In some respects, legend trips as a whole serve as tests of legends about haunted locations. If uncanny or frightening experiences occur, then they serve to confirm the truth of the original account. It is true that most legend-trip narratives are legends in their own right and often displace or suppress the narratives that charter the legend trip in the first place (Meley 1991:12).¹⁵

Logos

Intonation, Countenance, and Demeanor

There are, perhaps, no more important factors in the rhetoric of truth than intonation, countenance, and demeanor. Those folklorists that have worked with transcriptions of legends have often noted their intonation in discussing legend credibility. Countenance and demeanor have been mentioned, if at all, only in passing (Brunvand 1981:5).

"Vera's voice . . . is low, her tempo slow, her intonation almost monotonous, even her bit of dialogue is hardly differentiated from the surrounding discourse. There is a sad, reflective quality in both the narrative and non-narrative parts of her utterance. She is plainly thinking out loud" (G. Bennett 1984:82). "She is notably tense at key moments of the narrative and her voice is full of a gasping nervousness throughout the whole performance. There are also marked 'no go' areas in the story, where her voice trails away in a prolonged low-falling intonational contour which seems specifically to deter challenge" (G. Bennett 1989a:296). "This interruption is signaled also by a shift from Mary Beth's narrative tone, in which pitch levels are flattened almost to a sing-song quality, back to the conversational tone that prevailed when the participants were freely exchanging comments" (Ellis 1987:50). "The result is a different kind of irony, as the statement is made in Bruce's 'amazed' intonation, and the careful description that follows in 'rational' tone leads only to more exact observation of the impossible and therefore to greater certainty that something supernatural is empirically there" (Ellis 2001a:136). The point here is not to generate a list of examples where intonation is central in the projection of story truth, but to suggest that the intonations of truth need study. Intonation can communicate seriousness, wonder, joy, excitement, fear, sadness, anguish, nervousness, irony, and doubt. Most people successfully understand the import of such intonations when they are deployed, al-

though there is as yet no complete index of the means by which they serve to create a plausible account.

Laughter and Humor

Laughter and humor are often a part of legend performance. It would be natural to assume that the laughter of a narrator accompanying the relation of extraordinary events serves to discount the reality of the account in question or the interpretation that might be offered of them (Oring 2003:ix). Similarly, a humorous gloss would likewise suggest that an account is not to be taken seriously. A perfectly good illustration of these precepts can be found in Bill Ellis's transcription of a performance of "The Hook" legend (1987). Three women in their early twenties who had been friends through high school got together for an evening of socializing. One of them recorded the event for possible use in her university folklore class. The performance is punctuated by laughter, broad, humorous descriptions of events, and sarcastic commentary. The legend is clearly being told as entertainment. It is not intended to be believed. Ellis uses the laughter and humorous commentary to suggest a meaning for "The Hook" that had been overlooked by folklorists who had not analyzed tape-recorded and closely transcribed narrative performances (1987:54–7).

It is not possible to represent all the ways that laughter or humor adhere to legend performance. Some caveats may be offered, however, concerning their significance. There are different kinds of laughter, and not all are responses to humor or signify the discounting of the events related. Gillian Bennett remarks on the chuckles that accompany a legend told "for fun" (1984:80) and discusses the performance of "group sagas" that are "invariably told by two or more narrators, the audience chipping in, laughing, barracking, and accusing the narrator of 'rewriting history'" (G. Bennett 1989b:210). But Bennett also notes the "breathy giggles" and "tense, breathy laughter" that suggest the events related were not discounted but were regarded as true (G. Bennett 1989a:296).

Forms of laughter may also be associated with joy, wonder, triumph, and surprise. Even humorous laughter does not necessarily discount the truth of the message that it punctuates. A narrator related how he had briefly been a premedical student in Iran. His brother-in-law, a surgeon, would regularly invite him to observe operations that he performed. In one instance, an old woman came to the surgeon with an abdominal complaint. The brother-in-law had a saying: "Never let a thin membrane stand between you and an accurate diagnosis." He operated on her and found cancer throughout her abdominal cavity. He closed her up again and sent her on her way, expecting that she would shortly be dead. Sometime later, to the surprise of the surgeon, the woman returned with another complaint. He opened her up yet again. This time there was no sign of any cancer in the abdomen (Interview with Mahmoud Omidasalar, November 24, 2005).

The story was told in a light tone, and at the point of revealing that no cancer was found in the second operation, the narrator laughed. When asked whether this story was true, the narrator claimed that he was there and had witnessed both operations.

His laughter was probably meant to emphasize the surprise and dismay associated with the observation of the second operation and possibly to comment on the arrogance of medical science and its presumption to know the workings and outcomes of disease processes.¹⁶

When a humorous legend is presented as true, a special guarantee may be needed: "This is very funny, but this is absolutely true" (G. Bennett 1988b:14). Sometimes laughter may be of the discounting kind, without entirely negating the truth-value of the account. The laughter may be reflexive and serve to display that the narrator is aware of the unlikelihood of the events reported and the enormous leap that may be required to make sense of them. It may also be an attempt at face-saving: an expression of the ambivalence of a narrator who holds the facts of the account to be true, coupled with a reservation of judgment on their interpretation.

Framing

Framing concerns the degree to which a narrative is foregrounded in respect to the speech in which it is embedded. Certain folklore genres may open and close with formulaic frames, "Once upon a time" and "they lived happily ever after" perhaps being the best-known examples in the English language. In legend, the degree to which the narrative is foregrounded generally reduces its claim to truth. The narrative is characterized as a story rather than as a transparent representation of events. The difference is one between "words as words" and "words as world" (Ellis 2001a:100).

Words-as-words emphasizes the storied nature of the account: "In a small town in Utah, the story goes" (Jansen 1979:86); "There's this story back in Gary" (Barnes 1986:75); "There's this story of the birthday man who suffers gastric distress" (Jansen 1979:81); "Well, another story they tell about the fairies . . ." (Ballard 1980:35); "This is told as actually having happened" (Jansen 1979:84). Sometimes the introduction of the story uses the framing language of fictional genres: "I heard this story as a joke" (Jansen 1979:72); "Well, there's this businessman, see . . ." (75); "Do you know the one about the pregnant lady who was going to the doctor's . . ." (Barnes 1986:74); "I have heard other teachers mention it. I don't necessarily think it is a teacher's joke, but it's more the classic if you want to tell something that is going to flip people out" (Ellis 1987:42). Even the "Once upon a time" formula is sometimes employed (Jansen 1979:87). Some narrators may adopt the terminology of folkloristics itself in framing their accounts: "Well, let me see. I guess the place where the legend started was with this doctor" (Lecocq 1980:268), or "I know other versions" (Sobek 1988:151).

In words-as-world, pointing to the account as something told or passed on is avoided. The listener is thrust into the experience itself: "I was out riding with a bunch of guys and we finally ended up at the Tunnel" (Hall 1980:229). "What happened is they had gone to the grocery store . . ." (Barnes 1986:76). "Wow. You're really getting into a heavy thing. Where do you begin? Yeah, this is the way it began" (Lecocq 1980:266). "Now I'll tell you one thing! When I was younger I used to look into teacups. Now mother had a friend . . ." (G. Bennett 1999:68). "[Did] I ever tell you about the Pizza Hut ghost? Um, people would not close alone at the Pizza Hut because of him" (Ellis 2001a:119).

In discussing Zuni narrative, Dennis Tedlock suggests that framing may be proportional to the extent that a narrative departs from audience expectations of reality—true stories are less likely to be framed (1983:165). That correlation would seem to apply in this culture as well. Certainly, those stories with formulaic openings are most likely to be regarded as fiction. But even narratives that are purportedly about real people and events, when framed as “stories,” have considerably more work to do if they are to persuade an audience of their truth.

Matters of framing and distancing underlie the characterization of a narrative as “old” or “traditional.” Old or traditional narratives are necessarily distanced from their sources and framed as words-as-words rather than words-as-world. Such characterizations necessarily raise questions about the truth of an account. The extent to which the mantle of tradition is likely to enhance believability would depend on the extent to which tradition is revered in a particular society. There are societies in which the invocation of tradition would in itself prove suasive. In contemporary Western society, for the most part, it does not.

Narrative Positioning

There is another kind of framing that can take place in legend performance. It is the framing of narratives with respect to other narratives. The narratives may be those performed in the same venue. A narrative may be embedded in the midst of narratives whose truth-value is higher or contrasted with narratives whose truth-value is lower. Narratives may also be positioned in relation to narratives explicitly invoked by narrators as a contrast to their own accounts. “There was no lie [in it]—whatever lies there are about fairies—[it was] neither a remarkable story nor lies” (Correll 2005:7). At present, there are not enough good transcriptions of complex, legend-telling events to adequately document instances of this move, but it seems likely that truth would be enhanced by the judicious positioning of an account in relation to others.

Assertions and Affirmations

Because of their extraordinary content, legends often are accompanied by explicit commentary on their truth (Ballard 1980:37). Assertions are those remarks that comment on the truth of the narrative: “And that’s the God’s truth” (Jansen 1979:76); “That’s the truth. That happened” (Ballard 1980:38); “This incident is known to be a true story” (Glazer 1988:141); “That was a true as the sun shining in the sky” (Correll 2005:7); “Hayes was their name. . . . That’s true you know. There is no doubt about that” (G. Bennett 1988b:14); “This is absolutely legit” (Slotkin 1988:99). Affirmations are claims about the reality of the narrator’s experience or world view. Affirmations interpose the evaluation of the narrator between the event and its truth-value: “There was something there. I know there was something there” (G. Bennett 1989a:308); “Isn’t it extraordinary, that?” (G. Bennett 1984:84); “Some people think you’ve imagined these things, but no! I’ve heard my husband’s voice, and there’s not been a soul in that flat” (G. Bennett 1999:53); “I was very impressed by one of the stories told by one of my friends” (W. Wilson 1975:85). Bennett pub-

lished a list of affirmations that she encountered in her study of women's supernatural narratives, ranging from "I firmly believe" through "I don't believe in that" (G. Bennett 1999:193). It is not clear if there is a difference in the suasive force of assertions and affirmations.

Witnesses and Experts

The authority of an account need not rest solely on the narrator or the source. Witnesses may be invoked to corroborate the account. Witnesses may be included as participants in the narrative action. In "Messages from the Dead," the doctor describes the mother finding her child's chalkboard with a skull and bones and the child's name written on it in the child's own hand. She asked her other children whether they had written on the board, but they denied it. When a neighbor stopped by the following day with her small daughter, she took her to see the chalkboard, but the neighbor's daughter had been playing with the board and had erased all the writing. The girl said she had been trying to write on it, but the chalk wouldn't write. "Now at this point the mother swears that this is what happened, with the neighbor standing by her side and the children standing there, that the skull and bones reappeared. . . . Now, there were two adults there and three children" (Interview with Steven Barr, November, 13, 1975). In telling of a ghost that appeared one night in his bedroom chair, the narrator says, "And . . . my brother got right scared and . . . tell me to try and, tell me to turn [the] light on and I didn't. I were like paralyzed. I just couldn't turn it on!" (G. Bennett 1989a:308).

Shortly after the death of her sister's daughter, the narrator and some family members were in the kitchen preparing food for guests. They heard the crying voice of the sister. This sister was at the funeral home making arrangements. "We ran to this door. There were four of us. We ran to that door, nobody there, nobody. . . . If it would be only for me, they could call me a fool, or that I am raving, but all four of us ran" (Dégh 1995:291).

A variant of the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legend tells of a couple that picks up a bearded, long-haired youth along the highway. After a time, the youth asks his drivers, "Do you know Jesus?" When they answer, a little uneasily, "Yes," he says, "That's good, because Jesus, that's me." When they turn to look at him, the back seat is empty. Greatly agitated, they relate their experience at the next gas station they come to. The station attendant says, "You are the tenth family today to come and tell me the same thing" (Klintberg 1989:88). The attendant serves as a witness to independent reports if not to the event itself.¹⁷

Often, witnesses are not characters in the narrative but attest to it in the commentary on the account. "But some of the neighbors say that her leg was as cold as ice. It is her own father who told me the story from beginning to end, and Denis O'Brien from Ballyline Bridge told it the self same way. But in truth he is afraid that it is a bit make-believe and that she merely pretended to be dumb and lame. He admits however that respectable people told him that her leg was cold as I have already said" (Correll 2005:13).

Experts are not necessarily witnesses to the events reported but authorities in the subject matter of the narrated event. Experts are appealed to in the justification of a narrative: "Listen, scientists are looking into this, isn't that so? You hear me? They directly look after such things to find out" (Dégh 1995:304). The truth of stories about lake monsters is enhanced, for example, when it can be reported that cryptozoologists are investigating the matter with scientific equipment (Gabbert 2000:121). There is the legend about gang initiations in which gang members drive with their headlights off. If an oncoming motorist should courteously flash his headlights to alert them to the fact, they then shoot into his car. This legend often circulated on the Internet, through e-mail messages, in faxes and photocopies, and orally. The hard-copy versions often begin with an authenticating introduction: "A police officer working with the DARE program has issued this warning" (Brunvand 2001:241). Of course, appeal to the experts can likewise be used to discredit an account. In telling a version of the "The Hairy-Handed Hitchhiker," the narrator states, "Andrew works for the Police Department and said, 'Oh that's nonsense!'" (G. Bennett 1988b:15).

On occasion an expert may be a witness as well. In 1856, *The Deseret News* in Utah gave an account of a bearded man in strange garb carrying a little Hebrew book. He read from the book to the crowd around him and represented himself as the Wandering Jew. "A learned Jewish Rabbi was sent to converse with him, which they did in the Hebrew language. . . . The Rabbi tested him in the Arabic, the Phenician [*sic*], and in the Sanscrit, but soon found that the aged stranger by far surpassed him in intimacy with them all" (Glanz 1986:108). So the rabbi serves as both witness to his appearance and expert on his linguistic abilities.

Corroborative Invitations and Challenges

Legend narration often involves the participation of listeners who ask questions, support or challenge events, and offer their own interpretations (Dégh 1976:104–7). Narrators may encourage the support of certain members of the audience, particularly those who have been witnesses to the events in question, know characters described in the story, or have had similar experiences. By recruiting the support of others in the course of the narration, a narrator can reduce the dependence of the narrative on his own personal experience and judgment.

In telling about an old man who came out of a white house on a hill near a graveyard and started rolling down the hill, the narrator invites corroboration from someone else who claims to have seen him: "You know what I'm talkin' about don't you?"—"Yeah . . ."—"That little white house up on that hill?" (Peters 1988:228).¹⁸ In telling a story of how a priest raised the soul of a dead man from Hell and restored him to a room in his son's house, the narrator concludes:

Now this story was told to me by an uncle of mine, and you remember, he used to
sell milk round the town?
Uhuh, Joe. (Ballard 1988:171)

The invitation may be explicitly formulated as above or registered in the rising intonations of a question:

I know about a few week ago like I just start like getting a song in my head and I'm singing it and then I hear it on't radio next day?
 Yeah, I've done that.
 Sometimes I like hum this song and my mum thinks you know she's singing same thing.
 I've done that. (G. Bennett 1989a:294)

A corroborative challenge invites the listener to test some fact proposed in the narrator's account. Unlike the invitation, no response is called for at the time of the narration. Generally, the challenge cannot be met because the means of testing it are not immediately available. Slotkin cites an example of a hog butcher who maintained that he would not butcher his own steer or hog in a waning moon because the meat shrinks. After several assertions, he invites the listener to corroborate his experience: "And I said it was proven, that I done it, and seen it done. I say that anybody that wants to try it can try it and find out for their own satisfaction" (Slotkin 1988:89).

Discounting Alternative Interpretations

Proposing alternative interpretations can increase the credibility of narrators by showing them to be reasonable and discerning people. But if a narrator wishes to advance the truth claims of a particular narrative interpretation, that narrator must eliminate alternative interpretations of the events.

In the course of suggesting that some other smoker might have been in her dead father's bedroom before she entered, the narrator, in a legend discussed above, largely eliminates that possibility. Considering that she saw no one entering or leaving her father's bedroom, the rationalist explanation is belied by the perception of "three whiffs" or "three rings" of smoke that would have likely dissipated before she got into the room. She does not claim merely to have smelled smoke—something that might naturally linger in a room—but reports seeing the smoke as if the result of some kind of exhalation. It is important to note that once the alternative explanation is offered, interpretation becomes the focus of attention. What does the smoke signify? The narrator conclusively decides the matter with a secondary legend about the experience of her own daughter (discussed below).

Sometimes narrators suggest, either explicitly or implicitly, that it is up to the audience to draw their own conclusions about their accounts. The narrator only has the unvarnished facts to offer. In speaking of a man whose cart was overturned immediately after cutting a fairy tree, the narrator concluded, "I don't mean to say or imply anything, but this is the truth" (Correll 2005:8–9). In speaking of his own possible sighting of a lake monster, a narrator says, "It's possible it could have been a fish, I'm not going to stand on that. I'm not going to say it was Nellie or whatever. . . . Could have been a fish. It was big enough to be something. If it was a log, why would it have sank again? Why wouldn't it just float along in the water?" (Gabbert 2000:117).

Timothy Correll cites an example from the Irish Folklore Commission archives in which a man in Ballyshannon lay in bed for thirty years without getting up. They said he used to go with the fairies. "Whether it was true or not, I don't know. . . . He was able to tell them everything that was happening on the land, and he not out at all. . . . Don't you know well he must have been 'going with them'; what other way was he able to tell all that?" (Correll 2005:8).

Inviting the listener to make his or her own decision about the events described is deceptive. Listeners do not need to be invited to make sense of what they hear, so the offer is something of a ploy. Further, a listener's evaluation or interpretation is constrained by what the narrator has presented. One is expected to work with the facts as they are given. By the end of the description of the possibility of someone having smoked in the narrator's father's bedroom, attention is focused upon the source of the smoke, not its reality. In interpreting the ability of a bedridden old man to see what was going on in his community, the hearer is distracted from more basic questions: Was the old man truly bedridden? What communications did he receive from the outside, and what, if anything, was he able to see? Nevertheless, the invitation to interpret does make the narrator seem open to alternative suggestions and sound sincere in the quest for truth.

Narrative

Humans are a narrating species. There are no cultures in which narrative is not an important communicative resource. Narrative is itself a meta-message about the reality that humans share (White 1980:5–6). If narrative is universal, it may be local in its grammar, style, formulae, and performance venues. Narratives are formidable rhetorical tools capable of engendering a deeper commitment to ideas and organizations than other forms of information (W. Bennett 1978). There is experimental evidence that shows that information conveyed in a narrative is better remembered, more persuasive, and engenders greater belief than statistical information communicated on the same topic. This is true even for people trained to use and understand statistics (Martin and Powers 1983:100–1). Yet narrative presents only a single case, whereas statistical information can summarize a great number of cases. The proverb "For instance' is not proof" is belied by the power of narrative to persuade on the basis of a single example (98).

Narrative Strategy

Gillian Bennett has argued that the presentation of a legend narrative has much to do with its claims to truth. She noted that in her work with supernatural stories in Manchester, England, her woman informants employed two kinds of presentational strategies. One involved the straightforward telling of a personal experience that closely paralleled the structure outlined by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky for personal experience narratives: orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, coda (Labov and Waletzky 1967:32–41). She also noted stories that were structured in "non-final, non-linear forms" (G. Bennett 1984:82–3). These latter stories were

much looser in terms of the temporal unfolding of events and revolved around some central point to which the narrative repeatedly returned. Such narratives may return to an earlier time, introduce some new elements, and return to that previous time yet again. Elements of the story with central significance are repeatedly reformulated. Sometimes these loose patterns end with an invitation to clarification and discussion of what has been told (84–6).

Of forty stories told to Bennett in a linear fashion, only seven were told by women who seemed open to the idea of the supernatural. Most of the women open to supernatural belief preferred the looser, more circular patterns that focused less on story than on description, detail, and evaluation. “They revolve around the question of the truth and actuality of the experience, in order to classify and interpret it” (87).

In later work, Bennett compared the narration of a person who clearly represented his narrative as true with someone who obviously regarded his narrative as false—told “for true” versus told “for fun.”¹⁹ Neither of the narratives depended upon supernatural belief and, to folklorists, both were well-documented urban legends (1988b:14–5). Bennett draws a number of contrasts between the presentations (many of which are addressed above and below), but in regard to the question of narrative presentation, the narrative purported to be true is executed in a straightforward linear fashion that corresponds to Labov and Waletzky’s personal-experience structure (1967:19). Bennett notes that this narrative makes use of a “riffle and pool” (analogous to Frances B. Gummere’s “leaping and lingering” [1907:91]?) effect, in which narrative movement is temporarily “dammed up” by explanation and dialogue. “It takes a long time for a simple tale to get told,” states Bennett (1988b:20), but the explanation and dialogue are necessary to create understanding and plausibility for the story. They are what make the tale interesting and convincing.²⁰

Bennett sees the “riffle and pool” technique as characteristic of tales told as true (25), but this seems to contrast with her evaluation of the supernatural narratives she collected from women in Manchester that employed the more circular and less linear style.²¹ Perhaps, the discrepancy depends on the Manchester narratives being of first-person experiences, whereas the story told “for true” was a more distanced account. Perhaps the circular narrative is a defensive, rather than a persuasive, strategy.²² Bennett’s Manchester materials emerged in interviews with women whom she had not previously known and whom she interviewed for only twenty minutes at a time (1999:176–7).²³

Bennett also suggests that the circular strategies are more open and invite discussion, whereas the linear strategies close off discussion. Bennett’s informants, however, were mostly older women. The openness of the circular strategy might relate more to the networking and consensus-building that characterize women’s discourse (Tannen 1990). Linear presentations that might impede discussion and networking among women could prove stimulating for men, with their greater tolerance for “reason,” interruption, and debate.

The question of which strategies create the most compelling and credible narratives remains open. Compelling narrative strategies may be distributed by age and gender. Certainly, there are very compelling legend narratives that have distinctly linear organizations.

Narrative Detail

If dates are the buttons on the fly of history, as a history professor once informed me, then details are the anchors of narrative veracity. A narrative without specificity as to character, locale, or time is of diminished plausibility. I received a memorate by e-mail from a man who was certain he had picked up a vanishing hitchhiker (he did not use the term), although the hitchhiker only disappeared after he let him out of the car at his destination. Unlike traditional hitchhiker legends, the hitchhiker makes no prophecy nor does he later prove to be a ghost, although the narrator suggested in his cover letter that he was “a ghost or guardian angel.”

In 1983, I was working as a local freight engineer for the Southern Pacific R.R., between McAllen and Brownsville TX. Prior to departing on the outbound leg to Brownsville, I called the Crewcaller in Victoria TX and requested to be relieved from my assignment by an extraboard engineer.

The outbound trip took all of 12 hours and then we were off duty for 8 hours. At the most, all I really slept was about four-and-a-half hours. We are called 1½ hrs before our 8 hours are up to report for duty. By the time we got back to McAllen twelve hours later, the agent at the depot had gone for the day. I assumed that a relief engineer would cover my assignment at 6AM the following morning.

The 4–5 hour trip to San Antonio was uneventful, and I arrived home at about 3PM. My family wanted to go to the mall shopping, maybe a movie, and out to eat. To say the least, by the time we arrived home, I was ready for bed. (Terrell 2003)

The account begins with elaborate detail about the narrator's occupation, his employer, some occupational terminology (crewcaller, extraboard engineer), his routes, the year, and the time involved in all his travels. In terms of the narrative, the point of this introduction is to establish how little sleep he got, how tired he was, and how upset he was to find that the railroad could not find a replacement, which required him to drive to McAllen to run the train back to Brownsville. It was on his drive to McAllen that he picked up the hitchhiker. He gives the precise intersection where he picked up the hitchhiker on the highway he was taking back to McAllen. It could be found on a map. (I found it on a map.) By the time he finished recounting his trip, he had mentioned passing Pleasanton, Alice, and Edinburg along the route.

Granted, he was writing a stranger who knows nothing about railroad operations and procedures (see G. Bennett 1988b:22–3) or Texas geography. Nevertheless, the exposition is unusually detailed. Yet these details establish the narrator as someone who holds a responsible position and who knows exactly where he was, when, why, and where he was going. He comes across as a meticulous observer and a credible reporter.

Persons, places, and processes that are familiar to listeners might make the account more believable still (Tangherlini 1990:375–6; Tedlock 1983:163, 168, 173). Such details anchor the stories to the seasons, spaces, and activities of their own world. Thus listeners who know the intersection of S. W. Military Drive and Roosevelt Street, where the hitchhiker was picked up, or who are acquainted with the foul-ups that can

occur with work shifts may have invested substantially in the truth of the story even before its central events unfold.

Accounts that lack detail and specificity are likely to suffer from diminished credibility: "A man and a woman, and they had one baby, and this baby never slept. . . . But anyway, the father. . . . She went down to the . . . down to the town, or down to the village, or something, for something" (Ballard 1980:36); "It happened over a vacation, Thanksgiving, I think. Two girls stayed in the dorm by themselves" (Gridler 1980:147); "There was this lady who lived near this school. She lived up the road, and there's this pub that had been boarded up and things like that and she told me this story" (M. Wilson 1997:221).

Nevertheless, it is important for narrators to omit details that a narrator should not know (M. Wilson 1998:95 n. 6). "What the priest did or said, he didn't tell her. I wasn't told" (Ballard 1988:169). In a legend about a car being smashed into in a parking lot (discussed in the next section), the owners come out of the grocery store to find a note on their windshield. As the narrator gets into some detail about what was written in the note, moving beyond reporting to virtually quoting its contents, the narrator injects, "Oh, I don't know what it said" (Barnes 1986:76).

Story Logic

Even fictional tales have their own logical conventions. A poor peasant may come into the possession of a magic wallet that can never be emptied of gold, but he is, nevertheless, induced to sell it to the rich peasant (K. Ranke 1966:104–6), for without the sale, there is no story to tell. Popular television and film are filled with ludicrous premises and details. (For example, a hero pursued by killers knocks out one of his pursuers but does not bother to take his weapon.) In fiction, we often suspend our disbelief when we encounter premises or behaviors that are out of keeping with how the real world works. Although legends deal with extraordinary and even supernatural occurrences, their logic must adhere to the logic of everyday life, even if the central episode is unusual, extraordinary, and beggars commonsense explanation.

In the following legend there are some gaps in the logic of the narrative.

What happened is they went to the grocery store and when they came out with all their groceries, they noticed that their car had been backed into . . . and I mean the side of it! I mean not just a nice little ding, a severe crash. And as they're looking around surveying all the damage . . . that had been done to their car and it was a station wagon of course . . . their family car. They noticed that on the windshield was an envelope with the words "We Apologize" written on it. So they opened the envelope and there is this nice letter saying we apologize for hitting your car and we don't have any insurance and therefore, we won't be able to reimburse you for the damage. But please accept these two tickets as . . . our . . . (Oh, I don't know what it said!) as our apology, you know, enjoy the basketball game this Saturday night. And it was this big basketball game that everyone was trying to get tickets to . . . like the nationals or something like that . . . something important. So that Saturday they all went to the basketball game and when they came home their house had been robbed . . . and it was robbed by these people who hit their car. (Barnes 1986:76)

The account was followed by a question asked by the interviewer as to how the people whose car was smashed knew that the people who damaged their car were the same ones that robbed their house. The answer was that there had been a string of burglaries that happened in the same way.

To many, this might prove an account of a perfectly logical, perhaps even elegant, crime. But certain details raise questions. Among them: (1) If the burglars wanted to get the couple to go to the game—and I presume that it was a couple that was in the store—why damage their car so badly? Why inflict damage so severe that it might be unusable for the Saturday night game, when a simple and less noticeable ding would do as well? (2) If the point of the escapade was to be able to burglarize a house without being observed, why commit a crime in the store parking lot that might so easily have been witnessed and reported? (3) How could the burglars be sure that the couple had no previous obligations—guests, for example—that might keep them at home the night of the game? Could they even be sure they were basketball fans? (4) And finally, and perhaps most telling, if the car was a station wagon—a family car—how would two tickets to a basketball game succeed in making the house unoccupied? It would seem that there would be children who would remain at home, with or without a babysitter.

Listeners often overlook such gaps in story logic. Nevertheless, such gaps serve as openings for questioning the credibility of an account (Fine and Turner 2001:10). Indeed, some of the logical problems would disappear with only a few minor alterations in the narrative details: the car was only slightly damaged, as might be effected by a surreptitious blow with a hammer or a well-placed kick; the car was a two-door coupe rather than a “family car.”

Human psychological functioning must remain comprehensible even in the face of extraordinary events. A boy relates of hearing from neighbors that some previous inhabitant of his house had killed himself in a chair and that the spot was haunted. He goes on to describe how he and his brother were awakened one night and “saw the imprint of a shadow” in the chair. At first the narrator thought he was looking at a coat, but then he realized that there was no coat there when he went to bed. His brother was also afraid and urged him to turn on the light, but he claims he was paralyzed with fear. The shadow looked something like their father, and though they were scared, they began to ignore it. “And . . . finally, we went to sleep.” Someone in the assembled group in which the story was told asked, “You went to sleep with a ghost in the room?” (G. Bennett 1989a:308).

Whatever one believes about the reality of ghosts, the presence of a ghost that the narrator claims is scaring him to death should not lead to lapsed attention and sleep. The audience member challenges this implausible consequent of the events described and, in effect, questions the narrator’s good faith in his representation that he believed there was a ghost at all.

In the vanishing hitchhiker narrative quoted above, the narrator goes into great detail to describe how long he had been on the job, how long it took him to get home, how he had gone out with his family, and how he had returned home and dropped off to sleep, only to be awakened by the railroad asking him to return to work for a shift up in McAllen, some five hours away. Although the narrator states that he took

a cold shower, got a full thermos of coffee, and stopped along the way for more coffee, he asks the listener to trust his report that the hitchhiker completely disappeared after he let him out in McAllen. But the narrator has to some extent undermined his credibility as a witness by cataloguing how little sleep he had had in the previous forty or so hours (Terrell 2003).

Paralogism

Paralogism—false inference—is discussed by Aristotle in *Poetics* rather than in *Rhetoric*, where it is only mentioned in passing. If A has as its consequent B, then people will think that whenever B occurs, A must be its antecedent (1982:74). The thinking is logically fallacious, but it nevertheless plays an important part in promoting the truth of certain events.²⁴ Contemporary legends make considerable use of paralogism. I would expand slightly on Aristotle's conception of the paralogism to include: *behavioral consequence*, as Aristotle characterized it, *emotional reaction*, *evaluation*, and *physical evidence*. All of these can serve as consequents that affirm an antecedent as true.

Behavioral Consequence. A narrative tells about a mother's ghost that returns and tells her daughter that she should cease crying because the mother's shroud "is wet with your tears. Cry no more for me." After listing the number of her own relatives from whom the narrator heard the story, the narrator concludes: "And she said that father . . . her father and brothers, and all, died, and she never shed a tear after, for one of them" (Ballard 1980:38). The daughter not crying at the death of her other relatives implies that the visitation from the dead mother must be true. Why else would she fail to grieve for her close kin?

A woman told the story of an unusual crime in which a woman answered her front door while holding a red-hot poker. She is confronted with a masked assailant. Seeing the poker, the assailant, thinking it is a gun, tries to grasp it. He runs away. Later, he turns out to be a neighbor living in the building who is identified by his burned hand. When challenged about the authenticity of the account, the narrator replied with indignation, "It's perfectly true, and the man was arrested and is in jail now" (Simpson 1981:203).

Emotional Reaction. Often narrators will register their emotional reaction to the story or to elements of the story or recount the reactions of others who were part of the event. The fact that emotions were aroused implies that there was something to arouse them. "I went about two years ago, me, R. J., and Mike. We weren't scared or nothing. You know, we just wanted to go over there and see if it was scary or whatever. So we went over and as soon as we got to the road that it was on, this big gush of wind pushed the car back—it was scary. We were really scared and we weren't even there yet" (Meley 1991:8). In the next example, the narrator conveys not only the idea that he was horrified by the ghost he saw, but that he is still horrified: "I was scared. She turned around and started smilin' at me, still winding up the clock, God!" (Peters 1988:230). Why be scared unless there is something to be scared of?

Evaluation. Many legends include commentary on the significance of the action described. Such evaluation suggests that the events on which narrators are commenting

must themselves be true. In a 1935 version of “The Surpriser Surprised,” a girl, on her birthday, goes up to her bedroom and takes off all her clothes with the intention of surprising her long-suffering fiancé waiting in the living room below. After describing this scene, the narrator comments, “I don’t think she was desperate or anything like that—it was just she was so much in love and he was so patient.” When she comes downstairs naked to her fiancé, everyone from her office is waiting in the living room to yell “Surprise!” She faints dead away and winds up in the state asylum. The narrator adds, “Isn’t that something? Isn’t that awful? Can you just imagine?”—leaving little doubt about the narrator’s commitment to the truth of the account (Jansen 1979:66).

Similarly, in the story about the masked robber who grabs the hot poker held by the woman answering her door, the narrator concludes, “So you see, even in good flats you never know—even your own neighbours can be criminals” (Simpson 1981:203). If a commentary is offered on the significance of events, it strongly suggests that such events occurred.

Physical Evidence. Physical evidence can be material objects or objects created in discourse. In the area of Leksvik in Northern Trøndelag, Norway, a soldier named Anders Solli was killed by wolves on his way to church on Christmas Eve in 1612. He killed many of the wolves with his sword, but they kept coming back. When his sword became frozen in its sheath, he was torn to pieces (Johnsen 1989:150). There is a cross and a stone to mark the place of his death, and the monument serves both as a stimulus to tell the Anders Solli story and as a fact with which to verify it (155). His sword is displayed in the Leksvik church.²⁵ There is also a song about the event that describes Solli meeting his death on a moonlit night. An astronomer had computed that there was no moon on Christmas Eve of 1612, and people tended to dismiss that element as a fabrication of the song’s composer. In 1979, however, the astronomical data was re-computed and showed that in fact there was a moon. The first astronomer had overlooked the fact that the calendar used in 1612 was the Julian calendar and not the Gregorian calendar. Following the recalculation, people no longer apologized for describing the moonlit night in telling the legend (152–3). Thus the truth of the legend is buttressed by physical markers and artifacts. The physical position of the moon in relation to the earth and sun, which first operated to throw into doubt a motif in the legend, later served to confirm it.

A man whose leg swelled when he kicked at a bird sitting on his prize turnip found a large and painful boil rising on his leg. When the boil was lanced, a long white string came out of it and piled up on the floor. “The string was kept for years as proof for unbelievers, but the man always had a crippled leg to his dying day” (Rieti 1991:291).

Physical evidence can also be employed to delegitimize a claim. A group of people engaged in research on Bigfoot debunked the evidence of one of their own members. The woman claimed to have Bigfoot scat that she collected around the feeding stations that she put out in her back yard. When one member asked whether the scat had been analyzed, another member said, “Yes, well, I didn’t have to analyze it. I know what it is. I’ve seen it before because I was raised in the country. It’s raccoon ‘ka ka’” (Milligan 1990:94). The woman’s claim that Bigfoot visited her property is rejected, even though the existence of Bigfoot is not.²⁶

Instance of a Class

Legends generally recount unique experiences. In fact, the proliferation of versions of a story about the same or a similar experience tends to undermine the truth of a legend account. Folklore, after all, has been defined as materials that exist in multiple versions (Dundes and Pagter 1975:xvii). But there are kinds of legends that escape this fate because they make a claim not only about a unique experience but also about some aspect of the world and its operation. The truth of legends about crime, for example, can be enhanced by citing multiple occurrences, because criminals often repeat crimes employing the same *modus operandi*. In the legend about the damaged car and the basketball tickets cited above, the narrator refers to the repeated occurrence of the crime in his area: "It was a string of thefts that happened this way" (Barnes 1986:76). In an e-mail message that I received about a credit card scam, the document asserted: "The police said they are taking several of these reports daily."

A supernatural legend may report a unique experience, but it also makes claims for the existence of certain supernatural entities and processes. Consequently, a legend told about an encounter with fairies may serve to uphold the truth of another and completely different fairy account. Even a mention of other instances, without the recounting of a narrative, serves to make the point that the narrative is just one instance of a class of common occurrences and therefore should be regarded as true. The gas station attendant in the Swedish legend about the hitchhiking Jesus reports that he had heard a similar account from ten other families that same day. The extraordinary becomes somewhat ordinary.

Theory

Occasionally narrators may produce a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon or event they have recounted. While this does not seem to be a frequent strategy, it does exist. In collecting stories and conversation about happy and unhappy houses—houses that have a good feeling to them or a malignant atmosphere—one of Bennett's informants offered the following theory:

If it is possible you can get the voices of people who are living, you can get their voices in the air, that people can speak to you from a telephone from Australia, New Zealand, as if they were in the same room; and I've read or heard that every single word that's ever been spoken, every sound that's ever been made since the world came into being, is still here. Well, I think that your vibrations are all around you, and if there's evil, Hitler, or any of the dreadful atrocities, burnings at the stake, there's been heaps and heaps through history. You couldn't have terror and horror and violent physical pain and hatred and evil and it just disappears, just because the people have died. It's still there! And the same with very good people. (G. Bennett 1999:48–9)

A theory need not be framed in scientific or quasi-scientific terms. A theory appeals to a general principle by which the world is presumed to work—even a religious one. In speaking of the contacts between the living and the dead, one woman stated: "It

was Saint Paul, wasn't it, said we're encompassed with a great cloud of witnesses" (G. Bennett 1999:115; see Heb. 12:1). Another woman, in explaining why the board that fell out of the bed with a loud noise indicated that her niece had died, theorized: "Wasn't it that her spirit came back and sat on the spring?" (Dégh 1995:303). Theories may be idiosyncratic and ersatz or communal and traditional. They may also be elements of comprehensive—religious, psychic, spiritualist, scientific—ideologies (Dégh 2001:281–2).

Secondary Legends

Secondary legends are legends told to buttress the claim of some other legend. A secondary legend follows the telling of or reference to the primary legend (although the secondary legend may prove more compelling and important than the legend it is marshaled to support). There is a legend about a tombstone in a southern Indiana cemetery that has the imprint of a chain along its side. It is believed that the tombstone is one for Sarah Pruett, who was killed by her husband with a logging chain.²⁷ It is also held that if someone touches the chain during a full moon, that person will go insane. There are stories about people touching the chain and being chased by a big, bright light. "We didn't believe it, you know. We touched it during full moon and got out into the car and started to leave, and the driver looked in the rear view mirror; and that was all you know. 'Look, there's a white light!' Whoom! We were gone" (Clements 1980:259).

A narrator recapitulates some of this material and then tells,

And there was one person who totally believed in this, the spirit coming back, and another one said this is just the doing of another prankster. And as they were leaving Prospect, as the road winds down backwards, and as they were driving, this car came out of nowhere behind them, and it was speeding up, and came closer, and closer, and run them off the road. And this person who did not believe, this one was driving the car. And when they found the car, the person who did believe the story was totally uninjured, and the person who did not, was dead. And there was a logging chain wrapped around his neck. (Dégh 1996:39–40)

The memorate about a woman entering her dead father's bedroom following his funeral and seeing three rings of smoke (described above) is immediately followed by another account: "When my husband died, my daughter teaches ballet, or she did do, in Manchester. She does television work now. And-er-it was a very high building you know, and there was this stained glass window and she saw her father looking through this window! You see what I mean? And she's not like that! She's quite, you know, having a good time in life and—. You see what I mean? I suppose there's something in some things" (G. Bennett 1984:86). Her sensible and healthy daughter sees a manifestation of her dead father as her mother, the narrator, had seen of her own dead father.

When preparing to receive guests at the house after the death of her sister's daughter, the narrator and three others heard the sound of her sister crying, even though

the sister was at the funeral home at the time. The narrator adds: "Now wait a minute. And before Betty died, some two weeks before, she was still at home, there was a sudden clattering sound in the house at night. My sister believed that the pastry board fell off the wall. But the next morning the board was still on the wall. . . . All this . . . then . . . was related" (Dégh 1995:291).

Aesthetic Effects

Aesthetic qualities have often been denied to the legend. It has been said that the legend is formless (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:93) and that its only artistry is "the skillful formulation of convincing statements" (Dégh 1972:74; 1995:230). In fact, the lack of artistry noted for legends may be part of its rhetoric of truth. Art and factuality are often at odds. The patina of authenticity generally does not easily adhere to highly structured forms, graceful metaphors, and poetically crafted language. The word "artifice" denotes both decoration and deception. The manufacture of an artistic narrative would suggest, all too often, the contrivance of its truth as well (Mack-in 1969:206). Nevertheless, the legend does employ aesthetic effects, and I identify a few of these below.

The techniques used to create the appearance of reality in a narrative may be different from those to convey truth. Tedlock wrote of Zuni *telapnaawe*—narratives told only at night during winter about a world that is somewhat like the world of today—and described the narrator's skill in making the story exciting, with lots of action, action that you can almost see right before your eyes. The narrators also quoted the story characters at great length. These techniques—dramatization and quotation—"contribute to the appearance of reality through their immediacy" (1983:167). *Telapnaawe* are fictions, and in fiction the appearance of reality enhances the story. However, the appearance of reality is just that, an appearance—an aesthetic surrogate. It is effective within the fictional frame. It may establish a sense of reality emotionally but not cognitively. Dramatization and extended quotation may undermine the credibility of legends. They look too much like art. A fiction needs to be made to seem real, whereas a truthful account does not. The legend account, consequently, tends to conciseness and passivity—it has more the nature of a report than a reenactment. Dramatic reenactment may be a signal that a legend is being told "for fun" rather than "for true."

Humor might also be considered an aesthetic attribute. A story that is humorous might be suspect from its outset, since a genuinely funny story has a *raison d'être* independent of the actual occurrence of the events recounted. The legend introduction "This is very funny, but this is absolutely true" (G. Bennett 1988b:14) has already been cited above. A story, circulated on the Internet, deals with an extra-credit question posed by a professor on his chemistry midterm at the University of Washington: "Is hell endothermic or exothermic?" One student's answer was so "profound" that the professor supposedly shared it over the Web. The answer is, in fact, so cleverly formulated that it strains belief that a student could produce it under the pressures and constraints of a major examination. I had occasion to read the account to a friend

over the phone, who stated that she did not believe it because it was really “too good to be true.”

Other aesthetic effects may influence believability. Foreshadowing refers to the arrangement of events and ideas in narrative so that later events are anticipated and prepared for. It is generally considered a literary device and is regularly listed in dictionaries of literary terms (e.g., Cuddon 1976). In the vanishing hitchhiker narrative discussed above, events that unfold prepare the listener for the unexplainable disappearance of the traveler. As he begins his trip back up to McAllen, the narrator thinks to himself, “Man, I wish I had someone to go with me to McAllen tonight. No sooner than I turned onto Roosevelt, that there standing on the side of the road was a college-aged student with a paperback, holding a sign that said ‘McAllen.’” The narrator stops and tells him, “Man you are the answer to my prayers. Hop in. I’m going to McAllen and I was dreading going there alone.” Twenty miles later, as fatigue sets in, the narrator stops at a greasy spoon for some pie and coffee. He asks the hitchhiker whether he wants anything to eat or drink. The hitchhiker asks only for a glass of water, and he doesn’t even drink that. During the trip he tries to coax the hitchhiker into conversation, but “he didn’t say anything much and did not go to sleep either.” When the narrator finally lets the hitchhiker out in McAllen, he says to him that you were “an answer to my prayers” (Terrell 2003).

The uttered wish for company on the trip, which is immediately fulfilled, the unwillingness of a college student to eat or drink or say much of anything during the four-and-a-half-hour trip, and the reiteration that the hitchhiker was “an answer to my prayers” all suggest that the traveler might be someone special—not just an ordinary college student.²⁸ Little bits of information, which in themselves are in no way extraordinary, prepare the listener for the hitchhiker’s disappearance and the idea that the hitchhiker was no ordinary person. As a result, his eventual disappearance is not a complete surprise (Terrell 2003).

Foreshadowing also takes place in “Messages from the Dead.” The doctor relates, “Now the day the child died, that morning, when the girl woke up, she went to her sister’s bedroom, sat down with her, and suddenly told her that she felt that she was going to die that day, and that she was going to be in heaven, and there she would be able to see her sisters. Now two hours later the child had the hemorrhage and twelve hours later the child died” (Interview with Steven Barr, November 13, 1975). Three days after the death, the child’s writing appeared on the blackboard.

When questioned about the child’s premonition of her own death, the physician regarded it as not that unusual, suggesting that it happens with children in a hospital setting who have terminal diseases, even if they have not been told of it. “As far as that is concerned, I was not as shocked as I was by the other things” (Interview with Steven Barr, November 13, 1975). By accepting the child’s prophecy of her own death—indeed, in playing it down—the narrator prepares the listener to entertain the more extraordinary claim that the child could communicate from beyond the grave. There is also a sense of balance in the narrative as a whole. If the child has seen across the Great Divide in one direction, might she not be able to communicate in the other direction as well?

Hamish Henderson recorded the collaborative telling by the members of the Stewart family about the haunting of their house in Fife. The tale begins with an account of how relatives who were staying in the house one night heard noise on the stairs. The family dog was brought into the house and became very frightened, although no one was there. The tale is picked up with a relation of how one day the hand-pump pumped water of its own accord. It continues with an incident in which an attic door slammed shut when no wind was blowing. The whole concludes with the parents telling how they were paralyzed with fear one night while lying in bed and their observation of the specter of an old woman that disappeared before their eyes (Dégh 2001:142–8).

Daniel Barnes has noted that many contemporary legends conceal their narrative functions (1986:70). The significance of a particular action or narrative detail is not revealed until the end of the story. The girl who sits up all night in a car in a Lover's Lane and waits for her boyfriend to come back with a tow truck does not know that the scraping she hears on the car roof is her dead boyfriend swinging from the tree above the vehicle (71). Similarly, the owner of a Doberman does not realize that there is a burglar hiding in her closet whose fingers have been bitten off by the choking dog she has just taken to the veterinarian (Brunvand 1984:13–5). Barnes notes the similarity of this narrative strategy to the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century short story (1986:72).²⁹ Legend also shares this strategy with the joke, a genre in which the significance of an element in the narrative cannot be fixed until the punchline is delivered.³⁰

Does the concealed-function form of contemporary legend detract from or enhance believability? Memorates rarely conceal their functions. News stories in newspapers do not conceal their functions either. The gist of a news story is generally presented in the opening paragraph. There is no suspense and no sudden, final revelation (Oring 1990:170–1). Concealed-function narratives invite their listeners to encounter the world in the same way as legend protagonists. Audience members replicate their misapprehensions and enlightenments. Does this experiential quality enhance believability? I have believed legends presented to me in this concealed-function form, and I have observed people strongly affirm belief in others. But given that many people today have been exposed to the concept of “urban legend” in books, films, newspapers, and television with its concealed-function form, might not the form itself signal the presence of “legend”—a traditional story that many people believe but that more discerning people should suspect?

There are other instances in which an artistic effect would seem to affect believability. The legend “Swinging Chains” (discussed above) was performed and recorded as both a third-person and first-person account by the same narrator. In the first-person formulation, the narrator added an interesting detail. Bert was the short engineer who used to set the chains swinging as he passed by and who died in the plant, after which the chains would often swing of their own accord. In the first-person account the narrator adds, “He was an engineer there when they first built the plant” (Slotkin 1988:101). As Slotkin points out, this detail makes Bert “coeval with, and hence a sort of synecdoche for, the plant itself” (104). This small effect serves to explain why Bert's ghost would haunt the plant. After all, people die on the job every day without becoming ghostly presences at their places of work. But if Bert is, in some

sense, bound to the plant in some special way by virtue of his lifelong association with it, it might make some sense that his presence would continue.

Pathos

A legend is more likely to be regarded as true if it conforms to the *cognitive*, *emotional*, and *moral* expectations of its audience. These expectations are interrelated, although they are conceptually distinguishable. What does it mean to say that a legend is more persuasive if it meets cognitive expectations? It means that it is more persuasive if it conforms to the ideology and belief language of the listeners (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974:279). A legend about a ghost, for example, is more likely to be believed if ghosts are an accepted conceptual category and if the ghost behaves as ghosts are expected to behave. In her essay "Shakespeare in the Bush," Laura Bohannan (1966) recounted her attempt to tell the story of Hamlet to Tiv elders in a Nigerian village. From the outset, the Tiv elders rejected the possibility of Hamlet's father being a ghost, since in Tiv culture the dead did not return. In their view, the phantom that Hamlet encountered could only have been a delusion caused by a witch. Consequently, the tale for these elders was about witchcraft. What had been presented by Bohannan did not conform to the ideology and belief language of her audience. Accounts that conform to the ideology and traditional language of a particular group are far more likely to persuade than those that don't.

Legends about the vanishing hitchhiker are a case in point. In one type of the legend, a hitchhiker in the back seat of a car warns the couple driving not to attend the Chicago World's Fair because a terrible calamity will occur. The hitchhiker then disappears. When the couple checks the address the hitchhiker had given them, they discover the hitchhiker had been dead for some years. When this legend, which dates back at least to 1933 in the Chicago area, reached the Intermountain West, the hitchhiker became a Nephite. Nephites in the Book of Mormon are disciples who remain on earth to perform wondrous deeds. There are numerous stories about strangers giving succor and instruction to church members before disappearing. The vanishing hitchhiker warns the couple of their need to store food for an impending catastrophe as the church leadership had directed. What might have been a dubious account of a ghost reappearing at the scene of its death and its futile effort to return home is fitted into the conceptual framework of Mormon theology.³¹ Nephites come back to instruct and aid good Mormons, so the hitchhiker is a Nephite, not a traveling ghost or other unspecified individual. Widely distributed legends are accepted and retold when they are integrated into the cognitive framework of the Mormon community (W. Wilson 1975). Even if a Nephite is not explicitly mentioned in the narrative, the hitchhiker will still be understood by many Mormons to be a Nephite. It is as a Nephite account that an otherwise widely circulating story is likely to be understood, entertained, and believed.³²

Compelling legends should have an emotional resonance for their audiences. They should present language, images, and messages that stir preexisting emotional dispositions (e.g., see Fine and Turner 2001; Turner 1993). They are more apt to persuade if they can capitalize on resident fears and connect with deep-seated wishes. "I re-

member a child with a slice of bread with mayonnaise who was sitting next to a child who had a slice of pizza, grabbed the pizza out of the child's hand and stuffed it in her mouth. And I mean, what can you say to a child? I mean she was starving you know" (McIntyre et al. 2001:117). This is just one of the narratives that was said to have inspired the school- and community-based children's feeding programs that developed in Atlantic Canada in the 1980s. Each of these kinds of stories played upon the plight of a deprived child and was often accompanied by some salient image indicating the depth of the child's hunger—a child stealing food from other children, a child eating chalk, a child going through school garbage cans looking for food, a child stuffing himself with food at a school party until he is sick (115–7). These stories arouse the fears that adults have for children, as well as their desire to protect and alleviate misery. With such stories, there is a risk to the listener in *not* believing. Failing to believe potentially makes the listener complicit in perpetuating the suffering of little children. Tales that tell of child abduction, molestation, and murder arouse the emotions even more and increase the risk to the listener of failing to believe (G. Bennett 2005:247–303; Best 1987; Best and Horiuchi 1985; Victor 1990).

A legend is also likely to be more suasive if it reflects the morality of the listener. Stories told by Mormon missionaries tell of wayward missionaries who attempt to pray to the devil, confer priesthood on an animal or inanimate object, or violate rules governing missionary conduct. Such behaviors result in death or some other catastrophe. Sainly behavior brings reward. Saints avoid peril, and those who would assault or assail them are themselves punished (W. Wilson 1982:18–22). A Jewish narrative tells of a family that abandons secularism and keeps the sabbath, and thereby checks the advance of their daughter's deadly disease (Yassif 1999:434–6). Wickedness punished, righteousness rewarded is the formula that underlies the religious legend, and stories that attest to this moral equilibrium are most likely to be accepted as true in their respective religious communities.

The women Gillian Bennett worked with in Manchester were more likely to accept accounts about omens, telepathy, and visitations from dead family members, because they were elderly, churchgoing individuals socialized to be intuitive, gentle, unassertive, caring, and selfless. Accounts that were acceptable to them reflected these values. Consequently, these women were open to an account of a dead mother returning to aid or comfort her daughter, because such accounts were in keeping with their values of affection and caring—affection and caring that could reach from beyond the grave. They were reluctant, however, to entertain stories about "ghosts," because ghosts were strangers, were selfish, and were thought dangerous (G. Bennett 1999:17–25). Stories about them did not resonate with these women's moral vision of the world.

Conclusions

The above outline of legendry's rhetoric of truth has much to teach us about how the legend does its work. It may have even more to teach us when it is compared with truth-making practices in various social and cultural groups and in other areas of discourse. Is there a single rhetoric of truth, or are there many? If many, how do they

differ, how are they deployed, and what happens when the rhetoric of one speech situation is enacted in another?

There are other questions as well. How are strategies marshaled in particular performances? What strategies are most persuasive, and in what kinds of combinations? It is not hard to imagine a situation in which so many tropes are deployed that they call attention to themselves and decrease, rather than increase, the believability of the account. The legend's rhetoric of truth is not formally taught or studied. Its practitioners, in fact, often do not conceive it to be rhetoric at all. For them, it is simply as transparent a presentation of truth as language will allow.

Let us extend a little further the implications of the legend's rhetoric of truth. What if legend were defined as narration that invokes this rhetoric? What would be the effect of this characterization on the way legend was identified and studied? Folklorists have acknowledged that a narrative does not have to be false to qualify as legend (Brunvand 1986:122–5; Dégh 2001:200; Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:95–7; Wyckoff 2000:170–1). Nevertheless, folklorists gravitate to narratives that they almost invariably believe to be false (e.g., Campion-Vincent 2005:ix–xii; Fine and Turner 2001:3–12, 56). In other words, the acknowledgment really does not reflect practice. Were legend defined as a narrative performance that invokes a rhetoric of truth, all kinds of performances would immediately become eligible for legend status, from the truest of the true to the falsest of the false. In fact, truth and falsity would simply evaporate as relevant criteria. The advantage would be to remove the ideology of folklorists—explicit or implicit—from the consideration of what constitutes the object of study (G. Bennett 1988a:10; Oring 1990:163–4). Suddenly all kinds of stories would be included in the legend category that had hitherto been ignored, including those that folklorists tell each and every day about the worlds of science, politics, or even folklore. There would be no basis for trying to distinguish between “heart-wrenching tales of unimaginable woe” and contemporary legend narratives (McIntyre et al. 2001:119).³³

Within this greatly expanded category, scholars would be left to determine the problem that they chose to study. They still might be interested in told-as-true narratives that employed traditional motifs. There would be, however, a basis for an instructive comparison with those told-as-true narratives that do not employ traditional motifs.³⁴ (As it stands now, folklorists tend to regard narratives that employ traditional motifs as untrue, so there is really nothing with which to compare them. They are studied in isolation.) If they were interested in the relation of narrative to belief, folklorists would again be able to examine a range of narratives in which, for whatever reason, truth was thought to be sufficiently doubtful so that a special rhetoric was required.

The contrary situation is also suggestive. Narratives that meshed seamlessly with the ideology, sentiments, and morality of a group, such that they needed no rhetorical support, would not be considered legends, no matter how fabulous or absurd an outsider might find their contents to be. Stories of UFOs, Bigfoot, or ghosts might not qualify as legends in a group that did not invoke or demand a rhetoric of truth in their communication. Among Mormons, for example, Nephite stories might just be Nephite *stories*, were no special rhetoric invoked to persuade of their truth (see

G. Bennett 1993:20). Nephites would just be part of the cognitive landscape, demanding no more in the way of justification than automobiles or temple work.³⁵ Legends would consist of only those stories that marshaled a rhetoric because they were felt to benefit from its trappings.

A definition of legend in terms of its rhetoric would shift the assessment of legend from matters of belief to the performance of truth. The landscape of the legend, consequently, would be altered in significant and interesting ways. And while such a definition would probably create as many problems as it might solve, at the very least, the beliefs of the folklorist would be removed from the constitution of the legend, and that narrative category would be relieved of some of the ideological baggage with which it has long been encumbered.³⁶

Notes

My thanks to Gillian Bennett and Timothy Tangherlini for their comments on a previous draft of this essay.

1. David Buchan (1981:5) characterized the range of legends somewhat differently: happy, merry, horrific, unusual, unlucky, and group lore tales.

2. See Fine (1992) and Turner (1993) for legends affecting major corporations. The government and press were more concerned with rumors and legends about hurricane Katrina—for example, “About Those ‘Sniper Attacks’” (2005), Pandey (2006), and Pawlaczyk (2005)—the World Trade Center (Dunbar and Reagan 2006), and AIDS (Fine and Turner 2001:166; Goldstein 2004).

3. That is why Linda Dégh can characterize legends as expressive of “fundamental ideas concerning human existence” (1991:19) and Bill Ellis can see them as “the communal redefinition of worldview” (1987:34). Many legends, however, seem to do no such thing.

4. It “calls for the expression of opinion on the question of truth and belief” (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976:119). I prefer the truth part.

5. I do not mean to imply that truth-making practices are necessarily the same in all cultures. I focus almost exclusively on Euro-American examples. See Cooperson (2005) and Rushforth (1992) for discussion of the legitimization of belief in non-Western societies.

6. Inferences can be made about the surprise party legend and the baby-sitter legends as well: don’t trust young baby sitters because they are likely to use drugs or be otherwise irresponsible. The “Surpriser Surprised” legend might lead some to infer that when it comes to engaging in some types of embarrassing behaviors, one should take special precautions to insure that no spectators are present. These inferences, however, are not necessary to interpret the events in the story. These inferences are didactic—morals in the Aesopian sense.

7. Aristotle recognized that rhetoric and dialectic could be “acquired by habit” (1991:29).

8. And, of course, the rhetoric I elucidate is purely descriptive, whereas Aristotle’s is meant to be prescriptive.

9. However, legends may be based on media sources that were intended as fictional, humorous, or ironic. See Dégh and Vázsonyi (1976:99), for example.

10. There is some disagreement on the use of the term “memorate.” Some would reserve it exclusively for first-person accounts, while others would apply it to accounts told even at two or three degrees of distance (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974:225–8). I find this latter extension of the term unhelpful. A memorate should apply to a first-person account, even if that designation only identifies a rhetorical distinction. If degrees of distance are important, we might start using subscripts to indicate the distance the narrator measures between event experiences and narrative realization. A legend₀ would refer to a first-person account. Legend₁ would refer to an account that a narrator claims was heard from a person who experienced the event in question. (“Messages from the Dead” would be a legend₁.) Legend₂ would refer to a narrative heard from someone specifically known to the person who told it to the narrator. In cases

where the chain of transmission is unspecified, the legend might be regarded as legend_x and the standard “friend-of-a-friend” narrative might either be characterized as legend_x or, perhaps, as legend_{ff}. I doubt, however, that this type of notation will be adopted.

11. Narrators often use this perception of responsibility to create tall tales and other kinds of humorous accounts whose purpose is to deceive the listener.

12. Interestingly, the narrator’s wife made all sorts of remarks through the first-person narration questioning the ghostly interpretation that the narrator attributed to the event. Although at the outset of his narration she asserted that the story was “absolutely true,” it is possible that she reacted negatively to the personalization of the story that she had previously heard only in the third person (Slotkin 1988:99–105).

13. The account of the reporter checking the letter writer may be as remote as the account of the payment for the color television. Georgina Smith (1981:170) cites the account in *The Guardian* by Michael Parkin, who was not the reporter who checked the original story. In other words, the newspaper report of narrative distance involves the same distancing as the story it reports.

14. It remains unclear, however, why the narrator would avoid the ghostly interpretation, when he so meticulously prepared for it and when his interviewer seemed so willing to accept it.

15. “Some legend, it doesn’t matter which, is necessary to justify the traditional ritual [of legend tripping]” (Ellis 1982–83:63). In other words, the legends underlying legend tripping are merely the excuse for the trips; they are not what the trip is about.

16. When interviewed and recorded at a later date (Interview with Mahmoud Omidasalar, January 22, 2006), the narrator admitted that he actually had not witnessed the second operation. He also admitted that when he was shown the cancer, he simply believed what was pointed out to him. He was not trained to recognize it (although he claimed, in this account, that the surgeon called the anesthesiologist over who confirmed the pervasiveness of the cancer). In this later retelling, the narrator was laughing throughout the story as well.

17. This narrative also illustrates that the account is just one instance of a class.

18. The folklorist’s questions shaped much of the interaction in this narration, but the example shows how a narrator can invite responses and support for the truth of the account.

19. While it is indeed worthwhile to compare stories that were told to be believed and those told to be discounted, it may be problematic to base a comparison on only two examples. Bennett picks this up again in later work (1993).

20. Without the explanation and dialogue, the tale is reduced to the following: a woman was sleeping in a caravan driven by her husband. When he stops to urinate, she also goes out, but he drives on, not realizing she has left. Standing in her nightie, she is picked up by a motorcyclist who overtakes the husband, who is very surprised to see her. This, of course, is not narrating but summarizing.

21. Bennett may believe that the circular pattern she describes and the riffle and pool technique are similar because both slow down the delivery of the story. It seems to me, however, that the techniques are quite different. The circular technique is not linear; the riffle and pool presentation is.

22. Bennett calls attention to this defensive function (1984:83).

23. The Leicester materials that she collected involved longer interviews—from three-quarters of an hour to an hour-and-a-half—and were conducted in the women’s own homes, but these women were still strangers to her (G. Bennett 1999:181).

24. Tedlock (1983:165) has called attention to the use of paralognism in Zuni narratives, albeit fictional ones.

25. The sword is a Swedish one of a pattern that was only introduced after 1685 (Johnsen 1989:159).

26. The willingness of narrators to discount specific evidence and claims, although not a general belief, enhances their credibility. They demonstrate judgment and do not accept any and all testimony to establish their case.

27. The inscription on the stone, however, states quite clearly that Floyd E. Pruett is buried there. Furthermore, it seems that Floyd Pruett died before his wife (Dégh 2001:333).

28. There is an old tradition that angels do not eat or drink (Ginzberg 1968, vol. 1:234).

29. The “whodunit” was first invented in 1841 by Edgar Allan Poe in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” The significance of story elements is revealed to the reader only at the story’s conclusion.

30. Barnes (1986:74) actually compares the future-directed legend more closely with the joke because the end line is in direct discourse and seems closer to a punchline. It seems, however, that the concealed-function form parallels the techniques of jokes in general.

31. The instruction to store food came from church leaders, and they expected it to be followed because it was a revelation to the leadership. Instructions to the entire church were not supposed to be private communications initiated by supernatural agents (W. Wilson 1975:86–7). Even though the legends ratify church directives, they ignore church authority. Thus, the legends conform to a folk rather than an ecclesiastical theology.

32. They are even offered as testimony at sacrament meetings. See W. Wilson (1986:250–2).

33. In removing the criterion of truth from the definition of the legend, I am not suggesting that folklorists never need to ascertain what is true and what is not. Everyone has to make such a determination. I am only suggesting that such a determination should not predefine the legend genre.

34. What constitutes a traditional motif is itself a problem.

35. This is not the case, however. The appearance of a Nephite is unusual even for Mormons, and the accounts are considered extraordinary.

36. The study of legend would then begin to approach a “social psychology of knowledge” (Hobbs 1989:71).

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